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by Lindsey Godwin and Soren Kaplan

Program offerings in the expanding field of organizational development (OD) are increasing, as evidenced by the numerous programs listed on the OD Network Web site. In particular, the appreciative inquiry (AI) approach is gaining popularity within the OD community. Cocreated by David Cooperrider, a professor of organizational behavior at Case Western Reserve University, appreciative inquiry is a strength-based management philosophy and whole-system change methodology (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005) that is said to be "revolutionizing the field of organizational development" (Quinn 2000, 220) through its application of guiding principles that focus an organization's energy on success and possibility.

The demand for training in appreciative inquiry continues to increase as organizations across the globe, including the U.S. Navy, the United Nations, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, Hewlett-Packard, and Wal-Mart among others, have used AI to plan and execute successful multistakeholder initiatives for positive change. To meet this growing demand with a complement to well-established residency programs like Case's AI Certificate Program, Cooperrider created a partnership between OvationNet and the technology provider iCohere to provide a variety of online collaboration tools designed to support researchers, consultants, educators, and practitioners of appreciative inquiry. One of OvationNet's core offerings is a six-week online workshop on the foundations of AI in which participants learn directly from Cooperrider while engaging in experiential learning activities tailored to their own particular professional settings. As OD practitioners who have experience in both appreciative inquiry and online community development, we codesigned and facilitated these workshops in collaboration with Cooperrider.

The inaugural workshop was launched in the spring of 2005 with 30 participants from seven countries. A second workshop was offered in the spring of 2006 with 53 participants from seven countries. Most recently, 94 participants from 17 countries participated in the workshop offered in the spring of 2007. These three workshops have suggested several lessons for the successful design and facilitation of experiential, electronic learning (ee-learning) environments.

Creating Experiential Learning in an Online Environment

ee-Learning, as defined by Steve Eskow (Trevitte and Eskow 2007), describes a hybrid approach to pedagogy that combines online learning with experiential, offline, hands-on learning. While the electronic component of our workshop was influenced by the learning platform provided by iCohere, the overarching design of the workshop was informed by the experiential learning theory outlined by David Kolb, a prominent theorist of experiential learning and a colleague of Cooperrider at Case Western. Specifically, Kolb's experiential learning theory proposes that "knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb 1984, 41). While many discussions on experiential learning focus only on the experience portion of the theory, Kolb's model suggests that learning actually takes place through a four-step process called the experiential learning cycle (Figure 1). The steps in the experiential learning cycle include

- having a concrete experience,
- reflecting on that experience,
- conceptualizing abstractly about the experience, and
- actively experimenting with a new behavior.

Experiential learning theory acknowledges that individuals have different learning styles that reflect preferences for acquiring information. Some people, for example, prefer to rely on their senses and learn through experience, while others choose to observe others or quietly reflect on their own in order to learn something new (Baker, Jensen, and Kolb 2005). Despite these personal preferences, the theory proposes that an individual must move through all four processes to learn.

Workshop Overview

Cognizant of these principles, we designed the workshop syllabus (Exhibit 1) to support different types of experiential activities—both online and offline—that would help students move through the entire learning cycle. Each week the agenda included the following components:

- *A weekly "live meeting."* In this teleconference, Cooperrider presented information while participants asked questions, shared reflections on the week's topic, accessed slides and other documents within the workshop site, and engaged directly with other participants around the globe.
- *Learning activities*. These offline activities required students to apply the concepts of AI to their organizational experiences and gain hands-on learning of AI as a philosophy and a methodology, either with other students or on their own.
- *Readings*. Articles on the theory and application of appreciative inquiry, in conjunction with case studies and tools created by OD practitioners, illustrated how AI has been applied in various organizational contexts.
- *Learning presentations*. Prerecorded lectures from Cooperrider, along with video case studies from organizations, were available on demand to help students gain a deeper understanding of the concepts and applications of AI.
- *Reflective prompts*. These questions encouraged students to make links between the theory and their own experiences and invited them to share their reflections on the activities they were engaging in offline.

While the basic structure of the workshop remained consistent from session to session, certain elements did evolve in response to feedback from participants. The most common challenge reported by participants, who are globally distributed working professionals, was finding time to review all of the weekly materials and coordinating their schedules to connect with other participants for the applied activities. A number of changes were made to address these and other issues (Exhibit 2).

We also worked to tailor the content of the workshop for each unique cohort by providing additional materials as necessary. For example, our most recent cohort was less experienced with AI than prior participants. In response to this change, we spent more time covering the basic principles and providing additional examples than we had with previous, more experienced groups. As participants shared their individual interests in each workshop, we added supplemental content and resources to support individualized learning agendas; in our last workshop, for example, we provided resources regarding applying AI to professional coaching and using AI in schools.

Blending Technology and Content to Support ee-Learning

In designing the workshop, we realized that technology and content needed to work together to facilitate the range of learning experiences in the experiential learning cycle. The online iCohere environment, which includes discussion boards, live-chat tools, file-sharing options, and an expandable reference library, was designed specifically to support ee-learning. Participants began the workshop by reviewing a narrated presentation that introduced the workshop site's various features, including specific screenshots of the

environment. Taking different technology capabilities into consideration, we tried to create a varied weekly learning agenda that would not only meet individual preferences for learning, but also encourage participants to engage in other activities within the learning cycle (Exhibit 3). Students reported appreciation for these varied opportunities to engage in each of the different modes of learning (Table 1).

Bridging Online and Offline Environments

In addition to creating a virtual environment that supported a range of experiential activities, we also wanted to complement participants' online learning with offline applications. Each week students were required to engage in an offline, job-specific application project based on the weekly topic (Exhibit 4). We encouraged students to reflect on these experiences and make connections between their projects and the weekly readings in both online discussion forums and weekly live teleconferences. These tasks helped participants to move through the experiential learning cycle, from concrete experience to reflective observation and conceptualization and back to active experimentation. In their reflections on each of these weekly activities, participants reported enthusiasm for having such opportunities to connect with each other and to translate their online learning into offline applications (Table 2).

Supporting ee-Learning: Lessons Learned

After working with over 180 participants from around the world in three different workshops, we have distilled several insights about designing and conducting ee-learning courses.

The Learning Cycle Transcends Virtual Boundaries

The question of how people learn in online environments has prompted energetic debate. Like Kolb's experiential learning theory, Gardner's (1993) multiple intelligences theory suggests that individuals have different preferences and aptitudes for different types of learning. Further, Tapscott (1998) and Dede (2005) have outlined the impact of increasingly ubiquitous technology on the current generation's learning styles and abilities. Indeed, we have seen that age, cultural background, and geography (since some of our participants come from regions of the world where Internet connections are still rare or inconsistent) can all impact a student's confidence level with online tools and thus the learning experience itself. While limitations in Internet access may require additional measures, we have found that the principles of experiential learning transcend many of the other differences among our participants. If, as the theory suggests, an individual needs to move through the entire learning cycle in order to learn, then an online environment, like a traditional educational setting, must include an appropriate range of activities.

Similarly, educators in any environment must recognize students' different learning needs and design activities that support individual learning journeys. This is no small task; fortunately, a variety of resources have emerged to aid educators in designing effective learning activities within e-learning environments. For example, Clark and Mayer (2003) present a variety of principles to help educators design e-learning environments that are congruent with the natural human learning process. Online environments also offer educators a variety of unique tools, but at the end of the day, they are just that—tools to be used in support of rich learning experiences. The role of the instructor is to determine which online tools best support those experiences that engage students in the complete learning cycle and help students integrate these experiences appropriately.

It's Not Really About the Technology

While our workshop environment may include some features unique to the iCohere platform, we propose that

fostering ee-learning is *not* contingent upon the selected technology. The experiential activities we conducted can be facilitated using a wide array of available online applications. For example, many universities use Blackboard as a portal for e-learning. With the right kind of facilitation and activity structure, Blackboard and other similar applications, even tools as simple as blogs, can be conduits for ee-learning. While we do not disagree with those who have suggested that there are specific technology design characteristics that can be enhanced for collaborative purposes (Erickson and Kellogg 2000), we have found that successful ee-learning does not necessarily require the most sophisticated technologies available.

Rather, the key factor in designing ee-learning environments is intention. Trainers and educators who use online pedagogies must create curricula purposely designed to include the various elements of experiential learning: reflection opportunities, active projects, and conceptual resources. Without such intention, technology features—rather than educational outcomes—can begin to drive content. It is all too easy to get wrapped up in designing a course around a specific technology, trying to use all of the features that are available in some programs, or lamenting that the available programs do not have certain capabilities. A course-design approach that begins with ideas for activities and then decides which technology features best support those activities encourages a more effective use of technology.

Because we were cognizant of Kolb's (1984) and Gardner's (1993) assertions that different people learn best through different modalities, we presented material in multiple formats and, when possible, gave participants the option to choose among a variety of online tools, including written texts, video presentations, narrated PowerPoint presentations, live teleconferences, and Web links. With the right kind of assignment, we found that interpersonal connections and learning, rather than technology, became the focus of activities. As one of our workshop participants commented, "It was really a pleasure to chat with [my partner] the first time [online]. I found the technology—that I worried would be an impediment—faded into the background as we were able to quickly move to real conversation around our respective experiences."

Virtual Connections are Real Connections

Although many people in our workshop and in other online experiential learning spaces never meet each other in person, the connections they forge can be just as real and meaningful as if they were sitting beside each other in a classroom. Shared experiences create very powerful bonds, and it is important to use online tools to support these connections in multiple ways. Individuals can meet online in a variety of formats to collaborate on action projects, reflect with each other, and share resources.

To help students make meaningful connections with each other, we began each workshop with a paired interview activity; partners could use any one of many communication methods to connect. Repeatedly, participants reported how much they enjoyed these connections, regardless of the communication tool used, and they shared stories of their continued collaboration with their partners even after the workshop concluded (Exhibit 5). These examples have reminded us that meaningful, situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) can occur in e-environments that are designed to foster experiential activities through social interaction, collaboration, and the development of a community of practice. Because it emphasizes both action and reflection, experiential learning theory in particular provides a powerful platform for sparking such relationships, even when partners are connecting virtually across the globe.

Conclusion

Even with its challenges, our experience leading a workshop in an ee-learning environment has been very rewarding. By working to translate appreciative inquiry, an inherently experiential approach to organizational change, into an online workshop, we see the potential for other theories and approaches that are typically delivered in a traditional face-to-face setting to be delivered effectively online. As long as theories and concepts are applied to specific real-life issues, there is potential for creating a vibrant ee-learning

environment where participants engage in applied work offline and share their reflections online. Organizations that have globally dispersed audiences can particularly benefit from applying ee-workshop models such as ours because while participants learn content, they also build collaborative bonds that may otherwise not be possible.

The greatest challenge we experienced in creating an effective ee-learning environment is the time commitment from both participants and facilitators. Many people think that an online course must be easier or less intensive than a traditional course. To counter this faulty assumption, workshop leaders need to be clear in their marketing and early communications regarding the commitments that are expected from participants. The facilitator must also be ready to put in many hours at every step of the process. From designing the course to setting up the site, seeding conversations, and responding to questions, a facilitator's job requires countless hours and daily attention if participants are to feel supported in their learning processes.

Possibilities for ee-learning are expanding with the continued evolution and proliferation of technology. As the demand for ee-learning increases, there will be a growing market for innovative technologies that provide seamless connections among individuals and within large groups. Some educators have already begun designing technologies specifically with experiential learning in mind (Pimentel 1999). We see the potential for other educators to build on our experiences by employing new communicative tools that can support ad hoc live-group interactions in ways that were unavailable to us. New technologies will no doubt offer novel opportunities for expanded interaction and collaboration among geographically dispersed learners. Yet, even as new technologies emerge, effective ee-learning environments must continue to provide a range of opportunities for people to connect, experience, reflect, and create together.

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